

Investing in the Health of Future Generations

By Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui, Fifth District of California

As elected representatives, it is incumbent upon us to protect the health of all of our constituents, especially those who cannot protect themselves: our nation's youth. As the number of children struggling with autism, diabetes, obesity, and depression continues to rise, the American people are looking to their leaders to pinpoint the causes of the rising rates of disease among our kids. The National Children's Study is a groundbreaking effort that is already underway to do just that, and it will take a huge step forward on October 4th.

On that date, the most ambitious study of children's health ever undertaken will announce the first of three major expansions. Thanks to funding appropriated by Congress earlier this year, the National Children's Study will announce its expansion into twenty more sites around the country, more than tripling its size and preparing to enroll thousands of kids.

At its peak, the Study will track 100,000 children in more than 200 Congressional districts from before birth until they reach age 21. Along the way, the NCS will monitor dozens of potential risk factors that may cause many of today's childhood illnesses. The questions the NCS will answer are critical to the health of future generations, and are some of the most pressing we face as a society: Why is asthma now the most common chronic illness affecting our children? What is driving the increase in autism, which now affects one in every 166 American kids? How can we reverse the trends that are leading so many of our children to develop diabetes?

Congress and the medical research community must act now to find the answers to these and many other pressing health questions. The NCS is a perfect example of the kind of collaborative effort that can provide us with these much-needed answers. Additionally, it is based on a proven model outlined by our predecessors, who invested in a similar approach to medical inquiry in the 1940s.

In response to a high rate of heart attacks in Framingham, Massachusetts, Congress passed the National Heart Act in 1948. As a direct result of this bill, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute spent fifty years examining the cardiovascular problems of Framingham's residents. The Framingham Study first identified high cholesterol, smoking, high blood pressure, family history, and low exercise levels as risk factors for heart complications.

Thanks to the foresight of this study—and the lawmakers who funded it—we have a much better understanding of how to combat heart disease today. The results of the Framingham Study continue to pay dividends for our nation's health and economy. Since its completion, we have cut the national rate of heart disease-related deaths in half, and continue to save more than \$400 billion annually that would have been spent on expensive heart treatments and therapies.

The NCS is poised to surpass these numbers, for it is larger in scope and will assess a broader range of risk factors than the Framingham Study. It is the rare kind of federal initiative that will yield immediate and long-term results for our children, for America's families, and for researchers who will build upon the knowledge the NCS will generate. With our support, the National Children's Study will not only spur further medical discovery, it will also limit our nation's medical costs and create a healthier future for children nationwide.

Bipartisan support has enabled the NCS to move forward in the past, and many of us have recognized the importance of the Study to our specific constituencies and to our country as a whole. With Congressional support, October 4, 2007 will be another banner day for the NCS, for Congress, and for children's health. On that date, Congress will send a strong signal that we will remain vigilant in our support of the Study; that we are intent on laying a solid groundwork for the health and well-being of millions of American children.

Many of the medical techniques and practices that keep us healthy today are available because our predecessors in Congress invested in medical research. It is now our duty to do the same for the next generation of Americans. Supporting the NCS fulfills that obligation while shedding much-needed light on the health risks faced today by our youngest constituents. The National Children's Study gives us the opportunity to show true vision, leadership, and a commitment to the health of America's kids.